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New Mexico Spaceport approaches 'final frontier'

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If progress continues at its current pace, space tourists will fly to suborbit from the New Mexico Spaceport in little more than a year.

The construction of [Spaceport America](#) in southern New Mexico is rapidly advancing, as is development of [Virgin Galactic](#) spaceships to ferry paying passengers to the edge of space, said Spaceport Authority Executive Director Steve Landeene.

"We're about a year away from some pretty significant stuff," Landeene said. "The goal is still to begin flights to suborbit in 2011. We're sticking to our timeline, and Virgin Galactic is sticking to theirs. It's coming. You can taste it."

The Spaceport Authority has awarded, or is now bidding out, the majority of contracts to build the spaceport, located near Upham, about 45 miles north of Las Cruces.

The Authority chose [David Montoya Construction Inc.](#) of Alameda, to build the facility's 10,000-foot runway. The company has "bladed," or scraped out, about 75 percent of it, and trucks are now hauling in the first of 12,000 loads of gravel from Williamsburg. Construction is scheduled to be completed next summer.

The Authority changed its original plans from an asphalt runway to concrete, taking advantage of low commodity prices in the down economy.

"We can get concrete now at about the same price we would have paid for asphalt," Landeene said. "Concrete makes the runway about 30 percent more capable in terms of weight load, which means almost any aircraft will be able to land there when it's complete. That will attract more customers."

The runway will cost about \$30 million, or about 15 percent of the \$200 million budgeted for all Spaceport construction projects.

The Authority also awarded contracts for a waste water treatment plant, on-site water facilities, a fuel storage area and electrical supply and installations. It opened bidding for an apron to connect the runway with other facilities, internal roads and the terminal hangar facility. It still must initiate bidding for communications infrastructure, fencing and a fire and security building, Landeene said.

Meanwhile, Virgin Galactic – the spaceport's anchor tenant – has been test-flying the mothership that will carry passenger craft part of the way to space. The rockets that will ride on the mothership's belly before detaching to shoot into space are nearly complete. Virgin Galactic will publicly unveil the first model of those rockets on Dec. 7, and start test flights next year.

In July, Virgin Galactic received \$280 million from Abu Dhabi-based Aabar Investments, giving it a 32 percent stake in billionaire Richard Branson's space venture.

Branson's [Virgin Group Ltd.](#) has put more than \$100 million into Virgin Galactic since it formed in 2004. It collected more than \$40 million in deposits from passengers willing to pay \$200,000 to go to space, but the Aabar investment secures the company's financial future, said New Mexico Economic Development Secretary Fred Mondragón.

"It solidifies Virgin Galactic's financial situation and almost guarantees they'll move forward with their plans," Mondragón said.

Aabar also committed another \$110 million to develop satellite launch capabilities using the same mothership piggy-back system that Virgin Galactic is developing for passenger rockets. That could radically reduce the cost of satellite launches and open another lucrative commercial activity at Spaceport America, said Pat Hynes, director of the Space Grant Consortium at [New Mexico State University](#).

"There's immense interest in fast, low-cost technology to send satellites into orbit," Hynes said. "If Spaceport America offers those capabilities, it would attract a lot of public and private investment."

In fact, a large part of this year's International Symposium for Personal and Commercial Spaceflight, held Oct. 21-22 in Las Cruces, was devoted to potential satellite operations, Hynes said.

Rocket launches to test and develop space technology have been taking place at the Spaceport. [UP Aerospace Inc.](#) conducted a launch test on Oct. 10 for a vehicle being developed by [Lockheed Martin](#). UP also conducted a low-altitude launch in August for Florida-based Fundamental Technology Systems Inc., and in May, it sent up a commercial payload. UP President Jerry Larson expects a lot more launches next year.

"The three launches we did this year were the most we've done since we started operating at the Spaceport," Larson said. "We've diversified our contract services and picked up new clients. Business is growing."

For more information about the Spaceport, including photos and video, visit www.spaceportamerica.com.

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